

# INTERVIEW GUIDELINES



## OVERVIEW

Interviews are one form of assessment used in candidate evaluation. These guidelines assist DoD managers and supervisors in conducting employment interviews. The techniques and procedures included in this document were selected for their flexibility and adaptability to a wide variety of positions. When used in conjunction with the job analysis process conducted by your HR servicing activity, these methods will help ensure competency-based selection procedures are used as the foundation for merit-based decisions. If you have questions after reading this guide, your HR professional is available to provide you technical assistance in developing, conducting and documenting employment interviews.

Interviews are an important yet vulnerable part of the selection process. As such, they are subject to validation requirements and must be properly conducted in an impartial, objective fashion. Some basic points include:

- Candidates who have been referred to you on a candidate referral list may be interviewed.
- After initial candidate review, all, some or none of the referred candidates may be interviewed depending on your local bargaining agreement (if applicable).
- This determination will be based on merit system principles and equal employment opportunity criteria, and should be documented in your notes and retained for future reference.
- Questions asked of candidates must be job or competency-related.
- Maintain a copy of your interview questions and each candidate's responses along with other required selection documentation.
- Safeguarding interview questions is vital to ensure the integrity of the interview process, and also allows these questions to be used in the future.
- If candidates have falsely represented their qualifications, end the interview early though try to do so in a neutral rather than accusatory way, and document the reasoning in your notes for future reference.
- If it becomes clear that you simply misunderstood the candidate's qualifications, extend the courtesy of completing the interview although you will probably want to shorten it somewhat, and document the reasoning in your notes for future reference.

Planning for the interview is critical. Included in this document is a checklist and worksheet to assist with planning and documenting the interview process.

## **ASSESSING YOUR INTERVIEWING SKILLS**

*To assess your interviewing skills, ask yourself the following questions:*

Do I refrain from making a judgment about the candidate during the first few minutes of the interview?

Do I pause after the candidate finishes a remark to give the candidate a chance to elaborate further or tie up loose ends?

Do I repeat key parts of questions to allow the candidate to elaborate if his or her initial response was incomplete or in need of clarification?

Do I ask one question at a time?

Do I appear interested in the candidate and do I give him or her my full attention?

Do I avoid expressing approval or disapproval of the candidates?

Do I avoid indicating my own attitudes?

Do I use language appropriate to the candidates?

Do I talk the minimum amount necessary to gain substantive information?

Do I control the direction of the interview?

Do I obtain maximum information on all relevant points?

Do I give the candidate an opportunity to ask questions?

Do I cover the necessary points in closing the interview?

## **TYPES OF INTERVIEWS**

DoD must select people who possess the right competencies for the job, and the employment interview is an effective way of determining who has these attributes. The interview is popular because it is more personal than traditional selection assessments (e.g., written tests) and because it can be used to evaluate job characteristics not easily measured with other procedures (e.g., oral communication and interpersonal skills).

Interviews can be accomplished in a traditional face-to-face manner, by the telephone or even in a group. The format could be that of a structured or behavior-based interview (see OPM's Structured Interview Guide: <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/SIGuide09.08.08.pdf>), by a panel or by the actual hiring manager.

Interviews are typically used for one of two purposes:

- As part of the formal selection process in which candidates are screened or ranked based on their scores; or
- To verify candidates' qualifications for a job after they have been rated using other assessment methods, but prior to making a hiring decision. In a selecting official's interview, candidates' responses are typically not scored.

According to the Office of Personnel Management, employment interviews can be either structured or unstructured.

### **STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

All candidates are asked the same questions in the same order. All candidates are evaluated using a common rating scale. Interviewers are in agreement on acceptable answers.

## **TYPES OF INTERVIEWS (CONT.)**

### **UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

Candidates may be asked different questions. A standardized rating scale is not required. Interviewers do not need to agree on acceptable answers.

Generally speaking, structured interviews ensure candidates have equal opportunities to provide information and are assessed accurately and consistently. An unstructured interview, while appearing attractive due to its loose framework, discretionary content and conversational flow, lean towards being subjective, thereby reducing accuracy and inviting legal challenges.

It is critically important to determine your interviewing strategy early in the hiring process. Develop your methodology to include:

- Type of interview
- Selection of appropriate, trained panel members
- Development of interview questions (and approval as needed)
- Scoring (including any emphasis on and/or weighting of criteria)
- Consensus reaching protocol

## **DEVELOPING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

In some cases, pre-existing interview questions may not be available, and you will have to develop them before conducting your interviews. The position description and job analysis will contain a list of required knowledges, skills, abilities, competencies and behaviors that serve as a good basis for formulating your interview questions. These questions may be used for similar positions.

If you choose to use a point system to rate candidates' responses to your questions, be sure your method is well-documented and justifiable and that your ratings are consistent with your predetermined criteria. For example, candidates for a warehousing job might be asked how many months' experience they have in operating a forklift. You may have a predetermined "weight" for different responses, such as 0 points for no such experience, 5 points for 6-12 months' experience and 10 points for more than 12 months' experience.

Good interview questions have the following attributes:

- They are prepared in writing and approved before you conduct your interviews.
- They are objective.
- They provide evidence of directly related knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies and behaviors required to perform the job.
- They are concerned with experience or training. Ask for detailed information about particular phases of the candidate's experience or training if necessary; request that the individual expand upon his or her response if you need clarification.
- They allow the candidate to provide sufficient information.
- They contain appropriate vocabulary. Avoid specialized terminology, acronyms or organizational abbreviations in questions.
- They are straightforward and not designed to trick the respondent.
- They are asked one at a time; a question asking about multiple items or requiring several responses is confusing for both the candidate and the interviewer.
- They cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no" response.
- They do not have obvious answers.
- They do not deal with sensitive subjects.
- They do not constitute a test.

# TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

There are several types of interview questions, including closed, open-ended, behavioral and hypothetical questions. Listed below are the types of interview questions, the criteria that distinguish them and one or more examples of questions within this type.

## CLOSED QUESTIONS

- Require only a “yes” or “no” response or specific data.

*Example:*

*-What was your title at your last job?*

- If you asked a closed question, add follow-up questions that are open-ended using words such as “how,” “what,” “why” or “when.”

## OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- Require the candidate to develop an answer and provide more detailed information.

*Example:*

*-What was your most significant accomplishment?*

- Open-ended questions lend themselves to developing follow-ups because the candidate is telling a story with many components, each of which can lead to more questions.

## OPENERS

- A type of open-ended question that candidates are generally comfortable answering.

*Examples:*

*-Tell me about your favorite job, and how your supervisor made it so special.*

*-Talk to me about your least favorite job.*

## BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS

- A type of open-ended question that allows the candidate to provide more concrete evidence of past behaviors.

*Examples:*

*-Tell me about a time when you had to work really hard to complete a project.*

*-What was the most difficult assignment you ever had and how did you complete it?*

*-Tell me about a situation in which your supervisor was upset with the way you did something. How did you handle it?*

*Examples (for management-level candidates):*

*-Tell me about a particularly difficult employee you were able to turn around and help to become a good, solid worker.*

*-Tell me about a decision you made on the job that did not work out well. How did you make that decision? What would you have done differently in retrospect?*

- Reveals what a candidate actually did, thought, decided, created, led, negotiated, etc., in prior jobs.
- Responses to behavioral questions can be used to predict how the candidate may handle a similar situation in the future.

# TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (CONT.)

## HYPOTHETICAL QUESTIONS

- A type of open-ended question that ascertains a candidate's problem-solving and reasoning skills and whether he or she can think creatively under fire.

*Example:*

*-What kind of people do you feel represent a challenge to work with and how do you best deal with them?*

- Ask candidates to come up with a plan by describing a scenario that echoes a real-life job situation and see what they can do with it.

*Example:*

*-Were you ever in a situation where you had too many things to do in the time available? What happened and how did you handle it?*

- Ask hypothetical questions that help you learn about the candidates' people skills.

*Example:*

*-How do you work with new members of your group?*

## ACHIEVEMENT-FOCUSED QUESTIONS

- A type of open-ended question that focuses on the achievements of the candidate.

*Examples:*

*-What makes you stand out among your peers?*

*-What has been your proudest accomplishment?*

*-What would your current supervisor say makes you most valuable to him or her?*

## "PRESSURE-COOKER" QUESTIONS

- A type of open-ended question that deals with difficult job-related situations and ways that the candidate dealt with those situations.

*Examples:*

*-In what areas of your last performance appraisal were you most disappointed?*

*-Where do you disagree with your supervisor most often? How did you handle the last time he or she was wrong and you were right?*

*-What was your worst mistake last year, and how did you deal with it?*

## CHALLENGING CANDIDATES IN THE FINAL ROUND

- A type of open-ended question that gauges the candidate's level of motivation and engagement with your organization and the position you are trying to fill.

*Examples:*

*-Why do you want to work here and what makes you right for this job?*

*-What do you know about our organization?*

*-What is your understanding of the job you're applying for?*

Remember: Interview questions must be focused on job-related areas only, without any reference to race, sex, age, religion, national origin, birthplace, marital status, child care, sexual orientation, health issues or apparent or perceived mental or physical disabilities. They must focus on the candidate's ability to do the job.

*Contact your HR professional for assistance in developing appropriate interview questions.*

## PROHIBITED TOPICS AND QUESTIONS

It is very important that you not violate equal employment opportunity laws and regulations in the interview process. Since many discrimination charges stem from improperly conducted interviews, you should be aware of questions and topics of discussion to avoid.

Candidates sometimes volunteer information that employers may not lawfully consider in evaluating an candidate for a position. For example, they may tell you: "I have two children." "We are expecting a baby." "My spouse is disabled." Do not follow up on this information even though the candidate brought it to your attention. Do not write it down in your notes. The best way to handle this situation is to acknowledge what was said simply by nodding and saying, "Oh," "I see" or other similarly neutral comment. Then continue with your next prepared question related to the position.

The following table provides prohibited topic areas, why they should be avoided and when there are permissible questions related to the job that can be asked:

PROHIBITED TOPIC	WHAT TO AVOID	PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONS
Age	Any questions which tend to identify candidates who are 40-64 years of age. <i>Example: Do you remember the 1952 election?</i>	None. Your HR professional will verify age, if necessary, to ensure legally determined minimum age limits.
Race/Color	Any comment or question which relates to race or color.	None.
Citizenship	<i>Are you a citizen of the U.S.? Are your parents U.S. citizens? When did you acquire citizenship? What is your spouse's citizenship status?</i>	None. Your HR servicing activity will verify citizenship.
National Origin	<i>What is your national origin? What language is spoken in your home? What is your native language?</i>	None.
Religion	<i>What church do you attend? What religious holidays do you observe?</i>	None.
Work Schedule/Travel	Any questions related to child care, ages of children or other non-job-related areas.	If the job has special requirements, such as travel, overtime work or unusual hours, these conditions may be stated. <i>In this job, you would have to travel one week in every month. Is this a problem?</i>
Military Discharge	<i>Were you honorably discharged from military service?</i>	None. Your HR servicing activity may verify this if there is a requirement to do so.
Economic Status	<i>Do you have a good credit rating?</i>	None.
Security	<i>Do you have a secret, top secret or other security clearance?</i>	If the job requires a certain type of security clearance, this condition may be stated. <i>This job requires a top-secret clearance. Does this present any problem?</i>
Personal Plans	<i>How long do you plan to live in this area?</i>	None.
Sex	Any inquiry related to gender. <i>Do you plan on having children? Do you mind having a female supervisor? Can you work with a group of men?</i>	None.
Marital/Family	<i>Are you married? Do your children live with you? What ages are your children? Is your wife/husband in the military?</i>	None. Your HR servicing activity may verify if family members work at the same location/ agency to fulfill OPM requirements.

PROHIBITED TOPIC	WHAT TO AVOID	PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONS
Education	Any question asking about the racial or religious affiliation of a school. Any question asking for education level, not specifically related to the job to be filled.	Questions pertaining to how the candidate's academic, vocational or professional education may fulfill the required knowledge, skills, competencies or behaviors.
Organizational Affiliation	<i>To what organizations, societies or clubs do you belong?</i> Do not ask about affiliation with those whose name or character indicates race, religion, creed, color, national origin or ancestry of its members.	Questions related to the job to be filled and how the candidate's participation in the organization may fulfill the required knowledge, skills, competencies or behaviors (e.g., professional organizations).
Participation in Certain Activities	<i>Do you plan to purchase savings bonds? Join the association for this DoD Component? Contribute to the Combined Federal Campaign?</i>	None.
Police Record	<i>Have you ever been arrested?</i>	If the job to be filled has special requirements, such as bonding or security clearances, the following may be stated: <i>For this job you must be bonded or obtain a security clearance. Does this present any problem?</i>
Miscellaneous	Any inquiry that is not job- or competency-related.	Statement or notice that any misstatements or omissions of significant facts may be cause for nonselection.

# **PROCEDURES TO FOLLOW FOR A PRODUCTIVE INTERVIEW**

*The following considerations will provide for a productive interview:*

## **INTERVIEW PLANNING**

- Allow interviewed candidates to review the position description/core document for your vacancy, and to do so before the interview commences. This saves time for you, and avoids the appearance of administering a speed reading test. If you choose to provide the position description a day prior to the interview, then all interviewed candidates should be afforded the same courtesy.
- Use the same interview method with all candidates (e.g., in person or by telephone). However, if a candidate is unable to meet with you in person because he or she lives in a different commuting area, it's okay to interview him or her by phone.
- Allow the same amount of time for each interview session.
- Make sure the seating arrangement allows the candidate to feel comfortable.
- Use an interview room that is free from interruptions and distractions.

## **AT THE INTERVIEW**

- Ask the same questions, in the same order, of all interviewed candidates.
- Allow yourself time between interviews to record ratings and complete notes.
- Put the candidate at ease.
- Establish a friendly but business-like atmosphere.
- Welcome the candidate, thank him or her for participating and relay pertinent information about position duties, work environment, performance requirements, etc.
- Obtain sufficient information with each question; ask follow-up questions when a candidate's initial response is vague or inadequate.
- Conclude the interview by summarizing what will happen next in the selection process (i.e., how notification will be handled).

## **INTERVIEW FOLLOW-UPS**

- You are encouraged to notify all interviewed candidates of their nonselection in a reasonable amount of time, normally 5-10 days. Candidates may ultimately learn of their nonselection through an online inquiry or electronic notification, but this may not occur for several weeks.
- Remember that interview results are only one part of the overall evaluation process. They should not be given undue weight, and must be used in conjunction with other evaluation criteria.

Be cognizant of nonverbal communication on the part of both yourself and the candidate. The volume and tone of your voice, your facial expressions and your body movements communicate much to the candidate, and vice versa. Candidates will respond more freely to a warm voice, to interviewers who look them in the eye and actively listen to responses. Interviewers who slouch, look down or away, lean back in their chairs, fold their arms, doodle or perform other distracting motions communicate disinterest, a lack of respect or boredom.

## COMMON INTERVIEWING MISTAKES

*The following are common mistakes to avoid when interviewing candidates:*

Interviewers tend to make rapid decisions about the qualifications of a candidate within the first few minutes of the interview based on minimal information. This rush to judgment can be very detrimental to the hiring process. Once you sense that you're forming an opinion about the candidate, ask questions specifically to find out if your impression is correct. You may confirm what you have already sensed or you may find yourself surprised to discover that the candidate has characteristics or traits that you completely missed in your initial assessment.

Unfavorable information tends to be more influential than favorable information. Interviewers should avoid focusing on negative information to the exclusion of positive information.

Interviewers who do not have a comprehensive understanding of the skills needed for the job often form their own opinion about what constitutes the best candidate. They use this personal impression to evaluate candidates. Therefore, it is important to make sure interviewers fully understand the requirements of the job.

When interviewers believe they need to make a decision quickly, they tend to make decisions based on a limited sample of information, or on a small number of candidate interviews. Interviewers should adhere to the established interview procedure and timeline with each candidate to avoid making erroneous decisions.

The order in which the candidates are interviewed can affect the ratings given to candidates. While making ratings, interviewers should refrain from comparing and contrasting candidates to those who have been previously interviewed.

Interviewers should base their evaluation of the candidate on the candidate's past performance and current behavior as it relates to the competency being evaluated and not just on how the candidate acts during the interview. Questions and probes relating to the competencies of interest will usually direct the interviewer to the important information.

- Indicating that you have made a selection before all interviews are completed.
- Making promises of promotion or selection to any candidate.
- Soliciting a declination from any candidate.
- Assuming an accent to be a liability.
- Using terms such as "girl," "boy," "gal," "honey," "dear" or any other derogatory names when addressing the candidate.
- Wasting time with questions when information is already available through review of applications, resumes or candidate records.

## **COMMON RATING ERRORS**

*The following are common rating errors to avoid when evaluating interviewed candidates:*

### **RATER BIAS**

Allowing prejudices about certain groups of people or personalities to interfere with being able to fairly evaluate a candidate's performance. Interviewers should refrain from considering any nonperformance-related factors when making judgments.

### **HALO EFFECT**

The tendency to generalize either positively or negatively about a candidate's overall ranking or potential based upon a single attribute. Don't weigh your decision on a single accomplishment, association with a particular group, the college a candidate may have attended, etc.

### **STEREOTYPING**

The tendency to attribute traits or characteristics to an individual based upon a preconceived notion of the sex, race, ethnic group, religion, creed or other grouping to which the individual may belong. For example, assumptions that candidates may be more or less disciplined, verbally astute or mechanically inclined based on their sex, race or national origin prevent an impartial evaluation of candidates and are always inappropriate.

### **CONTRAST ERROR**

Occurs when the rating of one candidate is influenced positively or negatively in comparison with another candidate's performance, e.g., lower ratings for a candidate who immediately follows a strong candidate and high ratings for one who follows a weak candidate. Candidates are to be evaluated against objective criteria rather than against each other.

### **LENIENCY OR STRICTNESS**

A tendency for some interviewers to form uniformly high or uniformly low opinions. When most ratings fall at either one end of the scale or the other, it can be an indication that an accurate, objective assessment was not achieved.

### **CENTRAL TENDENCY**

Similar to the leniency/strictness error except the interviewer limits ratings to the middle range. These types of errors often occur if the interviewing criteria are not adequately defined.

### **"SIMILAR TO ME"**

Giving higher than deserved ratings to candidates who appear similar to you. People have a natural tendency to prefer others who are similar in various ways to themselves. Interviewers should concentrate on the responses given by the candidate in making evaluations, rather than on the outward characteristics and personality of the candidate.

*Extracted from information available in OPM's Structured Interview Guide, September 2008*

## **CONCLUSION**

Interviews are an important yet vulnerable part of the selection process that managers have primary responsibility for completing. These guidelines are designed to assist hiring managers in conducting effective employment interviews. Understanding what to do and not do, before, during and after the interview will help ensure equal employment opportunity is upheld and competency-based selection procedures are the foundation for strong merit-based decisions.

If you have questions about the interviewing process, your HR professional is available to provide you technical assistance in developing, conducting and documenting employment interviews.

# SAMPLE INTERVIEW WORKSHEET

## INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Candidate \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

COMPETENCY	PROFICIENCY LEVEL					COMMENTS
	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>GENERAL</i>						
<i>Writing</i>						
<i>Oral Communication</i>						
<i>Problem Solving</i>						
<i>Interpersonal Skills</i>						
<i>SPECIFIC</i>						
<i>Production Line Manager</i>						
<i>Operating a Forklift</i>						

### PROFICIENCY LEVELS MIGHT INCLUDE DESCRIPTIONS OF 5 LEVELS:

- 1 – Minimally proficient with close and extensive guidance
- 2 – Proficient in somewhat difficult situations with frequent guidance
- 3 – Proficient in difficult situations with occasional guidance
- 4 – Proficient in considerably difficult situations with no guidance
- 5 – Proficient in exceptionally difficult situations as a key resource or advisor

## ACTION

- Highly Recommended for Position
- Recommended for Position
- Not Recommended for Position

## INTERVIEWER'S SIGNATURE

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Competencies and Proficiency Levels would have been defined as part of the Job Analysis process. All interviewers would be provided this information in advance of interviewing.*

*Refer to OPM's Guide to Structured Interviews, September 2008, for more information*